

Teaching Liberation Psychology

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Introduction

This chapter

We have known each other personally for over a decade and although we had been developing our praxis in similar directions, we connected professionally at the 8th European Congress of Community Psychology. Maria was leading a roundtable discussion with Mark Burton, Raquel Guzzo, Steve Melluish and clinical psychology trainees, on what European community psychology can learn from Latin America, where Taiwo was participating. This was the starting point of conversations and Maria inviting Taiwo to teach liberation psychology together.

This chapter is based on our experience of joint teaching on a London based Professional Doctorate in Clinical Psychology course since 2011 (brief excerpts from the tapes of our teaching session in October 2013 appear in quotation marks and italics), and recorded dialogues between us taking place over meetings between November 2013 and February 2014. This chapter has offered us the opportunity to reflect and build on this shared teaching journey and to share our praxis (and hopefully spark interest in others new to these ideas). We start the chapter by introducing our relationship to critical pedagogy (education) before contextualising our teaching with respect to the workings of oppression and liberation in educational and professional contexts. We then describe key ideas based on Freire (1972, 1974), Martín-Baró (1994) and our joint experienceⁱ, as well as the process of teaching liberation psychology.

Positioning ourselves in relation to emancipatory education

Taiwo: In my youth, a lot of my learning happened in non-school settings; at home, debate and critical discussion were always around and involved me; my older siblings took me to see life-changing films (for example, *Biko*, *Cry Freedom*, *In the name of the Father* and *Malcolm X*) and attend community-run conferences, seminars and workshops on social issues that shaped my view of the world. Conference speakers and the audience were passionate and engaged; bursting out in spontaneous song; reading out powerful poetry and suspending the distinctions between speaker and listener, service-user and service-provider, knower and known. These experiences challenged the notion of listening passively to an authority as a means of joining a professional class, and presented education as a creative and alive 'practice of freedom' (hooks, 1994).

Maria: My mother embodied the student revolution of the early 1960s; she had a strong liberatory voice, which she was not meant to have as a married woman with children in the conventional context in which I grew up, under a fascist dictatorship in Spain. Running counter to and challenging the status quo, she educated me in expressing my own voice and standing up for social justice from a very early age. My connection with Cuba and the ideals of the Cuban Revolution –although acknowledging flaws– are also part of this, particularly, in that I have experienced a very different (in my insider view, freer) society. The narrative framework (White & Epston, 1990) and critical education (e.g. Freire, 1974; hooks, 1994) led my pursuit for a liberatory method of mutual learning in higher education.

The workings of oppression

Oppression operates as long as oppressive social conditions (such as prejudice and poverty) continue. With an awareness of macro-cultural and historical factors in service to oppression, it can be difficult not to assign blame to oppressors/abusers versus the oppressed/victims. However, we rarely, if ever, belong discretely to one or other category, given that in different contexts we could be either. Further, oppression is best understood as originating outside of people (rather than resulting from individual personalities), and therefore dehumanises us all (Freire, 1972), as it disrupts the potential for social equality, justice and well-being.

Oppression within an educational context

'Education' and knowledge are not neutral, but are culturally, socially and politically situated. 'Education' therefore, can uphold the interests of domination and oppression or act to challenge them. Dominant ideas inform every aspect of our culture including what is considered intelligence, the way we learn, the content of what we learn and the manner we are taught. The structure of higher education in Britain can be said to pose a number of blocks to the realisation of the type of radical praxis (theory and practice combined) advocated by Paulo Freire, Martín-Baró and other critical educators. Obstacles relate to both proximal (University) and wider (societal) contexts which draw on and reinforce dominant beliefs about teaching and learning based on the *banking concept of education*, a term Freire used to refer to the kind of education that saw the student as a passive recipient of an expert teacher who deposits knowledge. In addition, bureaucratic and administrative demands upon educators can constrain possibilities to join for thoughtful dialogue. If we apply the idea that processes have implicit in them particular results or outcomes to the context of education, it is unlikely that the traditional banking system of education will be able to educate for critical consciousness or '*conscientização*' (Freire, 1972), given the lack of dialogue between 'learner' and 'teacher'.

Particular educational structures might also reinforce this divide between 'learners' and 'teachers'. For example, Maria is both an educator and an evaluator (course tutor), with inherent power to pass or fail trainees. Conventional assessment methods continue to create this divide, which can be at odds with the aims and ethos of critical education. To embody a liberatory ethos, education needs radical engagement in dialogical learning/teaching, what hooks (1994) called 'engaged pedagogy'; 'to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential' (p.13). Although we may be unable to radically change conventional assessment methods, we are able to facilitate, from the very beginning of training, critical thinking that engages trainees in dialogue and challenges normative ideas about psychology. As a result, questions are posed, such as: What gives more voice to some ideas and silences others? Who is doing the asking and who is the subject of scrutiny? Who benefits? Having critique as a primary element of education is a move towards a collective praxis that is congruent with our aim to co-educate (together with) trainee psychologists to be critical thinkers capable of engaging in liberation praxis.

Oppressive professional discourses and identities

Teaching liberation psychology happens within the context of wider professional discourses that dictate the nature of our role, how we should understand distress and what we should do to *ameliorate* it, with the question of *transformation* of social conditions at the roots of distress largely ignored. Dominant discourses contribute to the construction of particular professional identities and constrain alternatives (Madsen, 2006). These professional discourses have embedded within them unspoken values and taken-for-granted assumptions that shape professional legitimacy and lead to unexamined daily practices. Generally, psychologists work within institutions and institutional practices that privilege professional expertise and knowledge, and responsibility *for* people defined by deficit and the need for protection; over curiosity, collaboration and accountability *to* people viewed as resourceful agents (Madsen, 2006). Teaching liberation praxis challenges ideas that have been around in psychology for decades, such as the centrality of psychologists' expertise, psychologists as scientist-practitioners, and the importance of practice that has a scientific 'evidence' base.

We consider common concepts such as *boundaries* and *neutrality* bad short cuts in trying to explain particularities of therapeutic relationships, because they allow non-engagement with the complexity of the encounter and because of how they position the therapist in relation to the other. Rather than bringing the frame of the relationship (boundaries) into the conversation so the other person can take part in thinking about these issues, psychologists traditionally come into the conversation with a set of established ideas that may not fit with the other person. It may be easier to draw on the notion of *neutrality* than reflect with the other person about how we achieve transparent and genuine engagement whilst maintaining them at the centre of the conversationⁱⁱ. Furthermore, these bad short cuts may not encourage us to critically reflect on what we are doing. By unquestioningly accepting the old corset of *boundaries* (read Tomm's online article in reference list for a critical perspective), and problematising *disclosure* instead of reflecting on what might be important to *share*, the profession may avoid fully immersing itself in the world of others.

The challenge for trainees is that, while assumptions and practices that fit within dominant discourses gain institutional support, ways of working that fall outside dominant discourses and do not "fit" are often de-legitimised. This marginalising and disorienting process can impact on the well-being of trainees and make them question the sustainability of liberation praxis in the real world.

The workings of Liberation

'Liberation', the transformative process of '*conscientização*' or '*conscientización*', in which we are both liberated and liberate, is dialectical, dialogical, relational and co-created. Therefore, no one person does the 'liberating'. The development of critical consciousnesses is liberatory, as it creates space to reflect; be shaped by and shape the world and see new possibilities as creative 'actors' (rather than passive subjects) in our own experience. This process is regarded as 'humanising' and leads to well-being. Humanising requires 'an opening against all closure, flexibility against everything fixed, elasticity against rigidity, a readiness to act against all stagnation' (Martín-Baró, 1994; p.183). Liberation is, thus, not an end point but a point of departure; a lens through which to critically examine what we do to transform the world. Martín-Baró (1994) argued that

the transformation and humanising of repressive institutions happens when all of the people who participate in them are transformed and humanised through dialogue.

Well-being in the context of education

Given that our identities are relational (Gergen, 2009), so too is the experience of well-being, which does not take place in our minds, but in our relationships (Afuape, 2014). When we teach (a form of human interaction) in ways that are disconnected from the lives of people and the lives of 'learners', we risk encouraging confusion, alienation and disorientation. Teaching that does not humanise 'learners' can impact on their well-being. hooks (2003) argues that teaching should enrich life 'in its entirety' (hooks, 2003; p.42) and quotes Parker Palmer as saying: teaching and learning 'is not just about getting information or getting a job. Education is about healing and wholeness...empowerment, liberation, transcendence, about renewing the vitality of life' (hooks, 2003; p.43).

Key ideas in teaching Liberation Psychology

Educating towards liberation requires a new language. Traditionally, clinical psychology training makes 'theory-practice links', which implies that theory is separate from practice and, thus, needs to be linked. However, theory is not empty, as there is an action and effect in the world that comes out of it; and there is no action without implicit beliefs and values. We propose instead the idea of *praxis*, which is both action and reflection (Freire, 1972). In teaching liberatory praxis we are grounded in the following key ideas:

The place of dialogue and conscientisation

A dialogical approach to teaching, where all participants engage in open and critical dialogue is essential to education as a form of social action and conscientisation (*conscientização*). This involves, really hearing 'learners' from their perspective, in their words, with respect to their preferences, and creating a space to reflect on their ideas; which does not set trainees on any particular direction except that of critical reflection. We are aware of the danger of trainees feeling overpowered by our passion for liberation psychology ideas, so we encourage trainees to listen in an active way, rather than passively accept our ideas. At the start, we ask trainees to consider what fits and what does not fit for them in relation to *their* values, whilst reflecting on where these values come from. It has been important for us to think about our audience (including those reading us right now), who may not have feelings or thoughts that fit with ours, and what we can do to allow for all positions to be acceptable. One way is to own our positions and their limitations, and engage 'learners'/trainees as co-investigators (White, 1997). Whilst this is an on-going process that does not necessarily lead to resolution of different positions, in *true* dialogue each person is moved and changed.

Ethical commitment to social justice - siding with people

Despite the profession's emphasis on *neutrality*, we have personal responses to the stories we hear; so what do we do with that? More congruent with liberation psychology's commitment to social justice is *taking an ethical position* on the side of the oppressed and marginalised. Getting inside oppressed peoples' perspectives is perhaps more of a 'true' *empathy* than generally understood in psychology, in that perceiving the world from another's standpoint and feeling from that position is possible only when immersing oneself in that person's context. Even if we cannot do so through lived experience, we can go some way by engagement in true dialogue and engagement of the heart (see

below). Really being a full person in the dialogue brings coherence and integrity to living, working and educating as an ethical act (Castro, 2014; Freire, 1974). We do this by embodying our particular contexts, set of values and principles for living, and 'personalising' our ideas and knowledge (rather than these being abstract, all-powerful theories). We do this *alongside* others rather than *for* others; and acknowledge that people are not problems, but people are always people (no matter what problems they have), with resources, skills and knowledges (Freedman & Combs, 1996).

The process of teaching Liberation Psychology

We start by briefly introducing who we are in a dialogue in front of trainees, "*so we can position ourselves in our context*". We share our preference for learning communities where everyone learns from each other. We talk about discourses and, as we speak, invite trainees to reflect on their own personal-professional contexts and how these inform their values, ethics and intentions. We unpack discourses that have influenced psychology and ask trainees to reflect on their own vision for psychology, what is missing from the current discourse and how they hope to be practicing when they qualify. We introduce our interest in liberation psychology and why we feel that it might enable us to go "*from the known and the familiar to something very different*" and "*look to other horizons for inspiration*". This context setting allows us to respond to questions by first inquiring about values and assumptions within the question and then contextualising our response within our own principles and beliefs, leading to a mutual examination of those which underlie our work. We attempt to encourage *critical thinking* and *consciousness* (*conscientización*), by reflecting on its three tasks: *de-ideologising the everyday experience*, *utilising the virtues* and *recovering the historical memory* of trainees (Martín-Baró, 1994).

De-ideologising everyday reality - reflecting on the taken for granted

We try to get students to reflect on the taken-for-granted assumptions about what counts as professional behaviour, how these relate to wider professional discourses, whose agenda these discourses serve, as well as the effects of these ideas on therapeutic relationships. Our aim is to unpick epistemologies, ideologies, and frameworks in psychology with respect to how they perpetuate injustice and oppression and diminish well-being.

Utilising trainees' values - building on trainees' best intentions

Given that praxis combines theory-practice-reflection, social, cultural and political understandings of people's emotional distress call for particular forms of action. We ask trainees to reflect on what is required of them following a revised critical assessment of the difficulties people face. Our assumption is that trainees are ethical persons who care about what they do, so it is important to reflect on what they are already doing to embed their work in the experiences, values and wishes of people they work with, despite professional and organisational constraints. Below are some examples of how we do this.

Changing the context

Although challenging established discourses can be energising, in that it opens up new avenues for action, it can also cause confusion and frustration among trainees, who may feel that the point of their education is to train them to *become* something other than what they are (professionals in the established order). We try to both acknowledge the

dominant discourses that pervade the profession, whilst asking trainees to reflect on what alternatives might look and feel like, using methods that expand their understanding rather than disrupt it. The following are two examples that trainees told us particularly did this for them:

- Maria shared her interest in the idea of turning things upside-down and inverting them in order to see something previously not seen, or to see the familiar differently and allow questions to be asked. Maria presented a reversed map of Latin America, *“which for a long time has been influenced by the West – the US, and European theories and practices”*. The map is a piece of art by Uruguayan artist Joaquin Torres proposing that Latin Americans need to stop seeing North America as their North: *“as the direction to guide ourselves towards... we need to be our own guide, so he turned the map of Latin America upside-down... he said our North, our direction, should be our South; should be South America”*. One student commented at the end of the session *“one of the things I will take away with me was when the map got switched upside down, and I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it since ... how do we support service user’s voices?... it’s really opened my mind to think about things differently and I’m still thinking about that now”*.
- Taiwo showed a video clip of young homeless people engaged in a theatre of the oppressed intervention, in which one participant said the project was about *“opening our eyes, letting ourselves see things, rather than what we’ve already decided to see”*. This seemed to beautifully articulate the idea of developing *critical consciousness* or, as we referred to it, *“deconstructing an assumed reality”*. One trainee commented that she was imagining what the very articulate and thoughtful young people in the clip would have seemed like, to others and themselves, sitting on a street corner. She reflected that by virtue of being in a different context (performing a play at the National Theatre), they were able to share insights, aspirations, dreams and ways of expressing themselves. Taiwo talked about Freire’s concept of dialogue being a *“mutual interchange”*, so that *“the quality of someone’s voice is intricately related to the quality of someone else’s listening”*. *“So how we listen and the kinds of contexts that we create can help to shape someone’s voice...then they have opportunities to reflect on their lives”* which *“can have a transformative effect”*.

The aim of this teaching is not to replace one set of professional discourses with another, but to broaden the options that are available to trainees to define what they regard as effective interventions, by using various ways of *“getting into dialogue with our reality”*. For example, rather than replicating the expertise versus non-expertise debate, we critically reflect on the opportunities and constraints of both positions. Dialogue helps us move out of the dichotomy altogether, so rather than defending one position against another, the focus becomes what is most liberating for the people with whom we work.

Implications of Liberation Psychology teaching

The more we truly hear different experiences and voices, the richer our perspectives and knowledges; opening possibilities that were not obvious before. But what can we do in the real world with newly learnt ideas?

Working with differences in worldview

The kinds of questions we ask shape our learning. Asking questions and not taking ideas for granted is a counter-practice to powerful established discourses such as within the NHS. For example, trainees often describe the challenges of being expected to engage in interventions on their placements that focus on the intra-psychic/internal world of the person, whilst being faced with the realities of the person's social, cultural and economic experience. Placing such challenges in a context of discourses can allow trainees to step back from the immediacy of their experience. By 'externalising' the discourses (White & Epston, 1990), trainees are supported in being 'critical of assumptions rather than individuals' (Madsen, 2006; p.53) and seeing how we are all in an ongoing and changeable relationship with a discourse. One way to do that is to get the learning/teaching community to reflect together about the complex dilemmas their various positions might pose. One possible outcome of such discussions is the idea that, without suspending their ethical position, they can endeavour to really learn what they are expected to learn on placement; given that from Freire's point of view, if we are not fully aware of something we may be 'naïve' to it, which might make any critique of it empty. By really apprehending an approach, in the context of its implied method, trainees can develop a critical consciousness about the actual impact of what they are doing on them and the other person. In this way, trainees can *more fully know* the theory they are critical of; not just from inside their experience, but from the point of view of people with whom they work. Awareness can make our critique fuller, *and* enable a deeper understanding and appreciation of why some psychologists draw on discourses and frameworks different from our own.

On-going dialogue

An important aspect of Liberation praxis is shaping how trainees approach the profession and think for themselves about the professional they want to be. This shift from 'right vs wrong' to shared examination of values and assumptions often results in powerfully transformative conversations. As already described, dialogue leads to meaningful action because as a living process it/we 'cannot remain static' (Anderson, 2012; p.11). By relinquishing the idea of being experts who have the final word, we highlight our capacity for listening and questioning. By facilitating the creation of learning communities, we demonstrate that we want to learn alongside trainees, so that we all come to mutually trust the process of dialogue.

Centralising dialogue in the teaching session, experientially demonstrates the role it has in liberation and well-being. We end our session by getting trainees into a 'fishbowl'ⁱⁱⁱ to talk to and listen to each other. Trainees come to understand more fully how dialogue allows us to jointly examine the potentially positive and negative effects of our practice. Rather than responding with certainty, dialogue is particularly needed, given that what constitutes liberatory or oppressive practice is not uncomplicated, but subject to varying views and positions.

In dialogue around our practice, we have realised the importance of explicitly *recovering historical memory* or *eliciting a community of support* to validate the liberatory ethics that trainees may already have. Introducing the use of 're-membering practices'^{iv} (Afuafe, 2011; Madsen, 2006; White, 2007) is one way we will be doing this. Allies, both actual and evoked in this way, can be powerful buffers against institutional constraints and professional ideologies that pull trainees into practices that are dishonouring of what is most important to them and the people they work with. Creating a community of support

would sustain our invitation to trainees to keep dialoguing, beyond the teaching, in their personal and professional lives and even with the reading they do, “*so that they keep going over, digesting, critically reflecting on and savouring^v the text*”. The hope is that trainees can savour the joy of opening, evolving and expanding their ideas.

Engaging the heart

These ideas and ways of teaching are potentially exposing; in interaction with others we come to know new things, about others and ourselves. We make things explicit when we are in dialogue in a way we do not when we think on our own, because dialogue requires an ability to tolerate deepening our awareness and opening ourselves to the other. Engaging the heart can ignite an adventurous desire and a joy for constant learning and taking new journeys to unknown destinations. Love can seem like an irrelevant theme when reflecting on applied psychology or teaching, but it is pivotal in the fields of therapy, revolutionary politics and liberation praxis. For example: systemic therapist Karl Tomm (1998) wrote about therapy as a labour of love; Ché Guevara said that ‘the true revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love’; and Paulo Freire (1972) stated ‘if I do not love life —if I do not love people— I cannot enter into dialogue’ (p.90), and he wanted to create ‘a world in which it will be easier to love’ (p.24). In our dialogue we noted that being able to “*name these issues out loud*” has been an exposing but enriching process, and putting the words ‘heart’ and ‘love’ in writing can give us permission to own them. Strangely, ‘heart’ seems to have been “*taken out of psychology discourse*” somewhere, as we can only assume that “*it must have been there at some point, because psychology started as a human endeavour and love is central to being human*”. Being called to be a real and whole person by the people we work with, and by trainees, is extremely liberating for us. We hope that owning this position encourages trainees to notice what for them most connects their hearts to what they do and stimulate on-going reflections on the ways in which we can liberate the heart of psychology.

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ⁱ This experience includes learning from trainees.

ⁱⁱ It is about what is helpful to the other; one way of centering the other in a therapeutic conversation is checking with them if it is going in their preferred direction.

ⁱⁱⁱ A **fishbowl** conversation is a form of dialogue that allows the entire group to participate in a conversation and reflect on each other's reflections. Trainees were split into two groups with an inner and outer circle. The first group filled the inner circle (fishbowl) and discussed ideas that had emerged from the teaching session, while the outer circle were invited to listen to this discussion until the designated time was over and the speakers and listeners were reversed.

^{iv} For example in her teaching sessions Taiwo starts by asking the learning community: As we discuss our ideas reflect on the sort of psychologist you aspire to be in terms of your core values and ethics: What's important to you? What's meaningful to you? What are your guiding principles? Who has inspired you? She then comes back to this at the end of the session and gets 'learners' to talk in pairs and then share in the wider group who their community of support might be.

^v Savouring implies an appreciation of taste and aesthetics.